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Swashing all the buckles

Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, catch a glimpse of the Great Marco Polos of the White House, just back from their secretive treks across the great deserts of the Middle East to meet with the powerful ayatollah! Better, step right up and see what diplomatic treasures McFarlane, North and Co. have brought back to their beloved homeland.

• American hostages? Yes, several have been released since these great explorers of our geopolitical world started their travels. But — did anyone notice? — several more have been taken in Beirut since then. As one terrorism specialist put it to me: "It will only set off a collection drive. 'Get me two Americans Friday...'"

• Contacts with the pragmatists and moderates in Tehran? First of all, those words — which sound so lovely to the innocent American ear — don't even apply in an Oriental bazaar such as Tehran. There are only people fighting for power with social and military weapons so complicated and so Byzantine that we cannot even begin to analyze them outside of cultural psychology.

But it is worse than that. As Robin Wright, the fine Middle East specialist at the Carnegie Endowment here, said: "Every Iranian leader the U.S. has had contact with in the past has been eliminated completely. Now is certainly not the time to do something publicly."

• Successful attempts to "moderate" the horrible ongoing Iran-Iraq war? Somebody has to be kidding. All that our great Marco Polos of the White House have surely done is give heart to the Iranians just at a time when there are signs of massive discontent, bitter political infighting, and such a severe loss of oil revenue that they realistically might have had to withdraw from the war.

Next — and this is so outrageous that one can only shudder in horror as one contemplates it — they might also have given the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's hordes sufficient parts to finally win the war! And if that happens, the moderate, Western-leaning Arab world could be destabilized and even destroyed as a result.

The situation in the area has become so sinister that our home-grown Marco Polos were lucky to get

out with their ears and noses intact. In the last several months, for instance, on three different occasions, dozens of members of El Dawa, the extremist Iraqi Shi'ite political terrorist group that is behind so much of the terrorism in Iraq and Lebanon, were captured trying to infiltrate Kuwait. This year, Kuwait has quietly expelled 26,000 people in its desperation to keep itself stable and out of the wars in the area. This is typical of the undercurrents flowing below the surface throughout this increasingly troubled area.

And what is the greatest power in the world (I am not being sarcastic) doing in the hopes of freedom? Playing childish games! In fact, we have finally reached our limits with such outrageous behavior.

This whole escapade represents currents of American policy-making (if it can be graced with that word) that are so serious that we simply must say, "For God's sake, stop it!"

For there is a basic flaw in our system today that underlies this naive and negative escapade, just as it underlay our thinking and actions in Vietnam, in the Iranian hostage crisis, in Nicaragua. It is that we have no governmental or institutional capacity anymore for long-range strategic thinking. We think only in "me" terms. We play games.

We used to have that capacity for long-range thinking. We had it in the CIA, in the Pentagon, in Policy and Planning at the State Department. In fact, we were brilliant at it — and at analyzing the predictable responses in countries such as Japan after World War II.

Then, under Jimmy Carter, the amateurs of the left invaded these sanctums. Under Ronald Reagan, the amateurs of the right grabbed them as booty. Now, men such as for-

mer presidential National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane and National Security Council terrorism expert Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North are less ideologues than they are games-playing swashbucklers who keep trying the same childish tricks from Saigon to Managua to Tehran. They never think, they never stop, they never learn — and they certainly never say they're sorry.

No other country could have sustained such a persistent ignorance about other cultures and about workable strategy as we have suffered since the early 1960s when the old Eastern Establishment began to fade and the arrogant amateurs flooded in. Until recent years, we have been protected from our faults by our isolation; but in a world of mass communications, mass weapons, and mass migrations, we no longer are so protected.

If the Democrats want to distinguish themselves in the next elections and offer the American people something new and different, all they really have to be is moderately intelligent about the world.

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